Taste in American Craftsmanship

A Good Report of It at The Metropolitan Museum

By Royal Cortissoz

With the new year the more important sales of the season come into view. They begin at the American Art Galleries with the dispersal of Orientalia drawn from the Art House established long ago by Mr. Thomas B. Clarke. Brief notice of the collection has already been made in this place. The exhibition opens to-morrow and the sale will follow promptly in January. There is every indication that from now on until the spring there will be an extraordinary number of exhibitions. At the moment there is something like a pause in the flood, yet even now there are new things, some of which are traversed below. One circumstance which promises to mark the season as a whole is especially to be noted. Though there is no want of foreign pictures there is a broad tendency in our local galleries to bring American art into the foreground. The years of the war unquestionably worked a change. They have brought us, it is true, unusual quantities of material from abroad, but during this period the native artist has been given his chance as never before.

Industrial Art

The Strength It Draws From Contact With the Past

There is an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of unusual importance, an exhibition which should not be neglected by any student of our artistic development. It has been arranged in two of the smaller galleries, customarily devoted to prints, and, by the way, in the matter of its arrangement it commands cordial appreciation. The subject is American industrial art; it is illustrated by specimens of the current work of manufacturers and designers who have profited by study of the museum's collections. It would have been very simple to have crowded twice the space with a heterogeneous mass of all manner of objects. The result would have been confusion, and, for most observers, boredom. The museum has wisely kept the show within bounds, making it remarkably representative yet avoiding duplication. The two rooms have an intimate and charming atmosphere. Since there is no overcrowding there is not a thing which fails to enjoy its proper salience, and the curator, Mr. Richard F. Bach, has shown such discretion in organizing the display that he has achieved, among other things, a really delightful harmony. A useful detail is the reference made on the labels to the sources from which the craftsmen have drawn their inspiration. It lends the last touch to a scheme that is invaluable in the light it throws on the present state of an important branch of artistic endeavor in this country.

The museum flings a wide net in preparing an exhibition of this kind and its liberality is well rewarded. In the list of coöperating firms the leaflet which takes the place of a catalogue divides the exhibits into categories. It opens with "Advertising," and the next group is devoted to "Commercial Containers." In short, there is nothing pompous about this affair. If it shows what the United States can do in costly tapestries and furniture, in clocks that are like works of sculpture and in similarly ambitious decorative objects, it shows also the beauty that can be brought into a perfume box, a box manufactured in its thousands. Thus one of the most precious lessons in artistic education is enforced, the lesson that even the humblest article of manufacture may be lifted to an edifying plane. And do the museum's collections help in this matter? Glance at these perfume boxes of the Colgate's and observe the labels, which tell us that the designers, Emily Duke and Leighton H. Smith, went for their motifs to Chinese porcelains. This one episode serves, as it were, to open a door into a whole world of artistic activity. The designer serves a commercial end, but by enriching his ideas at the museum he adds to that end an artistic grace. Moreover, we may be sure that commerce is only benefited by the transaction. Surely, the purchaser who has not the soul of a clod must be attracted by the container that has positive beauty about it. Turn from the boxes we have cited to the examples shown by the advertising department of Cheney Brothers. They are like echoes from the print department of the museum, illustrations of what can be made of typography and decoration when the designer takes the pains to reflect on the instruction offered him in the classics of the past.

There is a point of view from which we can imagine an observer of these exhibits taking exception to the influence of the past. He might regret the prevalence of what we may describe as archæological reconstruction or even flat imitation. Often our craftsmen seem to be plain copyists. We share, momentarily, the rather doubtful emotion of our hypothetical malcontent. But only momentarily. The sure renovation of taste is better than a wilderness of specious renovations of style. Old frequenters of the Paris Salon will recall the virtuosity of Carabin, his great wooden tables over the edges of which hobgoblins peered. There was some wonderfully fetching woodcarving to be applauded in his designs, but somehow we have the impression that that sort of thing has gone down in the wind. One of the most consoling thoughts suggested by the present exhibition is that our manufacturers have left the vagaries of l'art nouveau miles and miles behind them. If they are content to lean on precedent it is because they have apprehended one of the great truths of industrial art in the past, the fundamental truth that authentic types of design reproduce themselves, so to say, imposing themselves upon generation after generation.

Take, for example, the numerous pieces of furniture in this collection. Most of them might pass as antiques. It would be arbitrary, and a little absurd, to disparage them for this reason. The main point is that they are beautiful, and with this virtue we would mention another, their freedom from the rigidity, the coldness, into which their makers would certainly have been betrayed if they had been merely mechanical in their emulation of historic originals. Here is where we would emphasize that point of taste to which we have already alluded. Looking at a sideboard, like the one designed by Alice S. Erskine for the Erskine-Danforth Corporation, we are struck by the positive vitality of the piece. It derives from some souvenir in the Hoentschel collection, but it has a charm which could only have been communicated to it by the touch of true constructive art. We gather the same conviction as we traverse a great deal of the furniture here, the lighting fixtures, the metalwork, the textiles and the silverware. This last is positively exciting. In two cases there is a quantity of silverware exhibited by the Gorham Company, designs executed under the direction of Mr. Lionel Moses. The simplicity and dignity of these pieces come like a benediction when one recalls the elements that have so often disfigured our silverware. There is beauty of line in this work and there is an altogether admirable reserve shown in the ornament. Unmistakably this marks a reversion to the most honorable tradition of American silversmiths, the tradition of a day in which Colonial good judgment kept us from being showy. One is tempted to go on particularizing. The furniture of Francis H. Bacon, the lighting fixtures, clocks and metalwork generally of Edward F. Caldwell & Co., the leatherwork of Charles R. Yandell & Co., the metalwork of Samuel Yellin and of John Polachek—these exhibits and scores of others hold the visitor as he is not often held by contemporary pictures and sculptures. Over and over again we are impressed, too, by the healthy practicality of what we see here, the beautiful textiles from the Flambeau Shops, or the wall papers designed by Frank E. Leitch, which come from the Robert Graves Company. But most of all we are moved by the accent of good taste which lies upon the exhibition as a whole.

No doubt it is so pervasive in its effect because the exhibition is the result of a certain process of election. We know, of course, that there is still plenty of poor work to be found in the great mass of American industrial art. But to have achieved what is indicated here is to have made magnificent progress. After all, the collection represents a goodly number of firms. They are like so many widely separated springs of fine development. They all confess their debt to one central fountain, to the policy which the museum has established in recent years and followed with unremitting energy and helpfulness. It is the ancient policy which lies at the root of all true culture, the policy of seeking out the best. It is bearing the most delightful fruits, and we note as we leave these beautiful rooms one more highly important fact. If American craftsmen have good taste, are interesting themselves more and more in good ideas of decoration they have also a remarkable technique with which to carry out their designs. The things here are finely conceived and they are well made.

MADONNA, CHILD AND ANGELS
(From the painting by Andrea Alovigi at the Ehrich gallery)

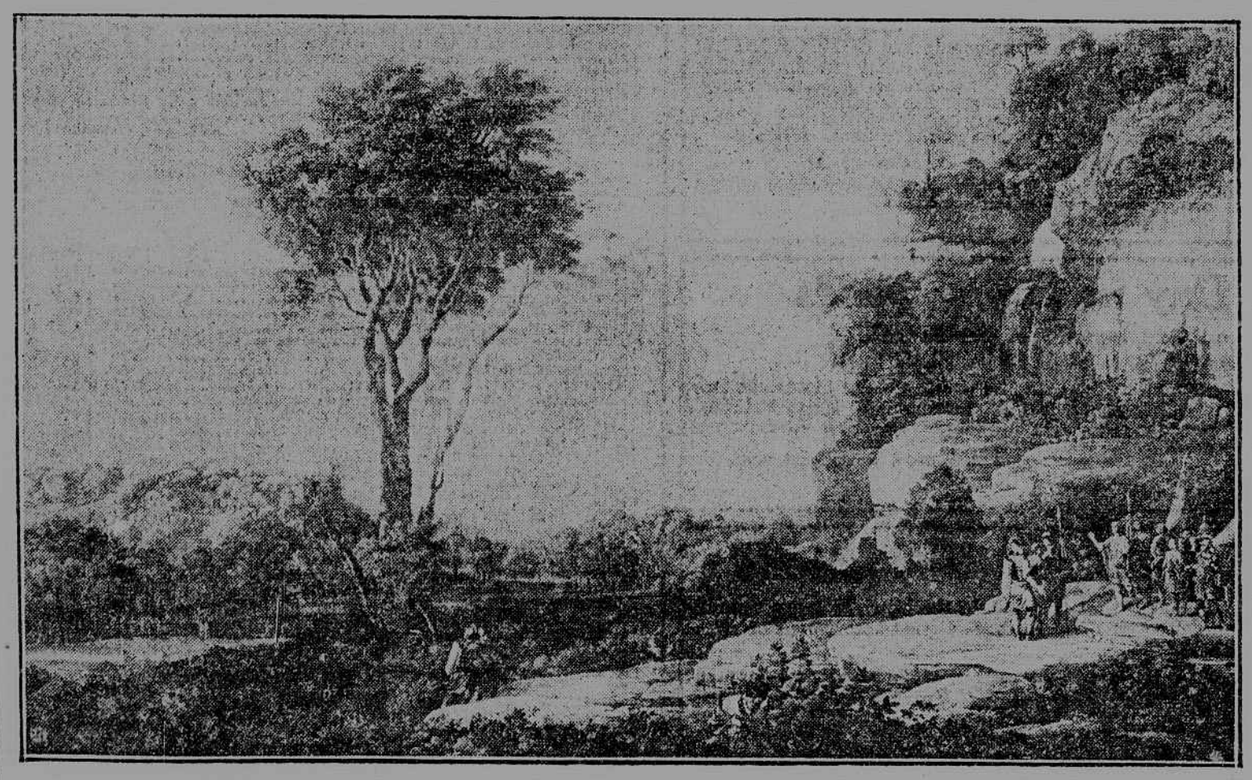
Nicholas Roerich

A Welcome Type of Modern Russian Painting

In his masterpiece, The Man Who Was, Kipling warns us of when we are to beware of the Russian. It is at the moment when he assumes the surface traits of Western civilization, when he conceals his racial origins beneath a cosmopolitan veneer. The masquerade is peculiarly unprofitable when it occurs in the domain of art. Russian painters have often looked to the West, but have not so often persuaded us that they were wise in doing so. When they have gone to Paris they have become Parisians. When they have been bitten by modernism they have had a way of turning merely fantastic. All the time they have kept us from knowing Russia. The distinction of Nicholas Roerich, the painter, whose works are voluminously shown at the Kingore gallery, is that he leaves us in no doubt at all of his faithful Russianism. In the catalogue he is introduced as an academician of Petrograd, and from the long list of societies to which he belongs one might infer that there was something "official" about him. But it is not academic or official art that he produces. He affirms himself at once as a man of originality, whose art must be saturated in the spirit of his land and its people.

The single alien influence which we would be inclined to trace in his work is that of Japan. It accounts, perhaps, for the composition of a few of his pictures, like "The Treasure." But even this influence is but vaguely felt. Stronger, altogether more obvious, is the influence of the theater. Even if the collection did not contain designs such as the seven scenes from Maeterlinck's "Princess Maleine," or the three for "Prince Igor," we would divine in Mr. Roerich a certain susceptibility to the decorative idiom of the stage. But where some of his countrymen have been lured by the stage into a meretricious artificiality he seems as sincere in his romanticism as though he were some artless primitive. He has, indeed, much of the character of the primitive, and especially his naïveté. Dozens of his compositions have the winning simplicity of tales told to children. He impresses us constantly as a folklorist turned painter. But to say this is to do but partial justice to him. The essential charm of his art springs from its depth of imaginative power, its inventive fervor. The best picture in the show, "The Cave of [illegible]," is catalogued as a scene for "Peer Gynt." As a matter of fact, it is less a painted scene than a painted poem, a fantastic idea subtly and impressively realized. Mr. Roerich passes from dreams to realities and back again. He throws off scores of imaginative designs or he paints Russian life and scenes. He can paint, we may note in passing, a beautiful landscape, as witness the two impressions done in the Northern Caucasus (Nos. 148 and 149). Whatever he does, he is lavish of color, color that is always bold and sometimes a little heavy, a little more suggestive of chromatic experiments in the studio than of contact with nature. On the whole, his warm, sumptuous note is very attractive.

In his style, in which we take him to be most the Russian, he discloses again a certain naïveté, and in this factor of his art he is at least persuasive. The touch is not only heavy, it seems at times fairly clumsy. His style has vigor which wants refinement; it arrests attention but it exerts no charm. Frequently it recalls the halting and literal method of some old missal, done by a monastic illuminator of the most modest gifts. Yet even while we are repelled by the crudities in Mr. Roerich's technique we are won back to him by their indescribable Russian savor, their suggestion of an inborn and organically wholesome racial habit. His art, with all its limitations—and it has these not only where style is concerned but in matters of form and color—remains profoundly genuine. There is personality in it and there is a rough native force. The Russian in him interests us intensely. That by itself is important and presently we find that with interest there develops also a lasting liking. It is as though one traveled through various distractions in Russia and suddenly came upon some romantic place, marked by curious architecture, peopled by picturesque figures and flooded with plangent color. The strangeness of fairyland descends upon the beholder and yet he feels that fairyland has come true. Some such sensation as this we have in traversing Mr. Roerich's exhibition.



AN ITALIAN LANDSCAPE
(From the painting by Claude at the Satinover gallery)

PRINCE GOLITZIN'S PALACE
(From the painting—for an operatic scene—by Nicholas Roerich at the Kingore gallery)

Old Masters

Claude Lorrain and Some Painters of the Madonna

There is an exhibition at the Satinover gallery of only two pictures, but those two are interesting enough to have a room to themselves. Both are by Claude, "An Italian Landscape" and "The Rape of Europa." The art of this seventeenth century master is rarely seen here and though it has been illustrated in a few of the American collections brought to the hammer we can recall from these occasions no examples comparable to the two just mentioned. They are of special interest because they represent him in the most pastoral aspects of his classic mood. Towering porticos and other antique motifs seem almost inseparable from his work, yet, as a matter of fact, he is one of that small group of painters in the historic past who had stirrings of our modern emotional conception of landscape. In the Italian scene delineated in the longer of these two canvases there are figures of Roman men at arms occupied in some formal colloquy. Claude, of course, could not have done without accessories of the kind. But they remain accessories, subordinated utterly to the grand purpose of the painter.

This is to realize that vision of a glorious antique world which he was wont to superimpose upon the fabric that he drew from nature. Because he had genius he knew how to adjust his classicism and his naturalism in a perfect unity. His naturalism no doubt falls far short of that to which we have been accustomed since the Barbizon painters arose and paved the way for impressionism. Claude's mountain forms are akin to the curious stratifications we see in certain of the backgrounds of Mantegna. They are part of the monumental scheme of things in which, as a classicist, he was absorbed. But always he secured that balance to which we have referred. His rocks are modulated away from severity by the presence of green things, and the main elements of his design are those which are derived from noble trees. He is sylvan even when he is monumental. And how this classicist, this academician, could paint! If the student of technique has any doubt of that let him analyze the painting of the wavelets in "The Rape of Europe," or look to the leafage in both pictures. Both in drawing and in color there was a great deal that was "modern" in Claude. These paintings have a serene beauty which, quite apart from questions of technique, must make them enchanting to the connoisseur.

There are fourteen old paintings of the Madonna at the Ehrich gallery. It is a portentous number. One could hardly expect so large a group to be uniformly on the same level, and we are in nowise surprised at finding certain of the exhibits rather dull. But the collection contains a sufficient number of really beautiful pictures. The Bissolo is a charming thing, and so is the Jacopo del Sellaio. The example of Pietro da Messina is also good to meet and there is an example of the early Pisan school of quite unusual interest. One or two good pieces of Northern art are likewise shown, notably a polished little panel of sixteenth century Flemish origin. But most fascinating of all is the "Madonna, Child and Angels," which we reproduce. The painting is by Andrea Alovigi, called "L'Ingegno d'Assisi." The figures, placed beneath a swelling arch in this composition, are ingeniously, yet in simple fashion, grouped in gracious attitudes. The color is sparkling and tells in quieter tones in the landscape which stretches beyond. The refined, precise technique does not exclude a certain subtlety in expression. The painting has genuine tenderness. Alone it would repay the visitor, but we think the whole exhibition, even with its minor examples, is well worth seeing.

Drawings

Some Records of European Architecture

In his exhibition of drawings at the Harlow gallery Mr. Kenneth Conant addresses himself to lovers of architecture in uncommonly lucid terms. He has had an architectural training and this shows in his work. He knows how to express the bulk and character of masonry and how to define details in such wise as to satisfy a builder. He has, in short, that sense of structure which is precious beyond all else in drawings of this kind, the feeling for architecture as architecture which secures picturesqueness almost, we might say, by leaving picturesqueness to take care of itself. Mr. Conant's impressions have been gathered in France, Italy and Spain, especially among the great churches of those countries. He has drawn them with veritably uncanny skill, using a firm sharp line which is nothing if not accurate. Brought together in a book, either with or without text, they would form a kind of gallery of European monuments. A historian of architecture would find Mr. Conant an incomparable illustrator.

Incidentally, this exhibition raises some pointed questions. For example, can the connoisseur of architectural drawings eat his cake and have it, too? If he is to be given the truth, as Mr. Conant so unmistakably gives it to him, must he be content to dispense with other artistic qualities? There is a curious one-sidedness about this draftsman's work. It is such good work, so far as it goes, and it is so successful in the rare art of preserving upon paper what we may call the architectural rectitude of a building, that one very nearly forgets what Mr. Conant misses. Sooner or later, however, his omissions press upon our attention in such a manner that we cannot ignore them. Rejoicing in him architecturally, we are nevertheless a little disappointed in him as an artist. We alluded just now to his "impressions." The term is not, perhaps, altogether exact. It connotes, ordinarily, a certain tincture of personality, and there it must be confessed that Mr. Conant's drawings are not noticeably rich. He has the defect of his quality. That firm sharp line of his is accurate, as we have said, but it is also somewhat colorless, somewhat akin to a mechanical process. He has an extremely self-possessed and even authoritative manner. He hasn't, on the other hand, a style. Or, if we must call this a style, this stamp that he places upon all his drawings, it is an extremely conventional style. He gives us, indeed, records, and though they are better than the records made by the camera they come perilously near to falling into the same category. We are familiar with many of the monuments he has drawn and we are struck by the fact that he has not enveloped any of them in the French, Spanish or Italian atmosphere in which they respectively belong. He draws everything in the same dry light. It is partly a matter of method and partly, we suppose, a matter of temperament.

Mr. Conant was possibly ill advised in showing more than a hundred of his drawings at once, all done on the same scale, all done in the same tone. The result is unquestionably a certain monotony and a certain emphasizing of the limitations as regard style at which we have glanced. But we fear that even a more restricted view of his work would have led us to the same conclusion. We would still have felt, as we feel now, that he needs to cultivate a greater elasticity, a greater breadth. If temperament alone were at the bottom of his art as it stands we should not feel very hopeful of his developing a wider scope; but method, we repeat, is in a measure accountable, and here, surely, he has possibilities before him which we hope he will consider. They are such possibilities as we may realize if we turn for a moment to the work of an architectural draftsman like Muirhead Bone. He, too, like Mr. Conant, has a flair for structure, for accuracy; but he is aware of the potentialities of line as line. It is a resource which can be carried to an extraordinary pitch of eloquence, and one way of reaching that pitch is the process of letting one's self go, drawing with greater freedom and with a keener eye for the color, which is one of the prime elements in the magic of architecture.

Mr. Conant would seem to have hardly any sense of color at all—to have no feeling for "values." We have just one glimpse into his art, which suggests an appreciation of those modulations of tone which the distribution of light and shade produces. It is the sketch of a coat-of-arms on the Cancelleria, which opens his catalogue. Therein, by some passing impulse, he has been stirred to introduce a fairly black note. But elsewhere, in drawing after drawing throughout the collection, he adheres to an even key of gray which is far from satisfactory. To see how serious is his neglect of values, the observer may examine more particularly the two drawings made at Dijon (Nos. 81 and 33), or the drawing of "Tuy From

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